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978-0-521-88148-7 - An Introduction to the Unitarian and Universalist Traditions

Andrea Greenwood and Mark W. Harris

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

*Introduction*



Flaming Chalice, symbol of Unitarian Universalism in most of the world. (A serpent and dove symbolize Transylvanian Unitarianism, representing wisdom and peace.)

Once there were three men who were in the same book club, and also of different faiths. Michael, George, and Francis – or Miguel, Giorgio, and Ferencz – had very different backgrounds, spoke different languages, practiced different professions. Like us, they lived in an era when technology completely changed how information spread. For us it is the digital age and globalization; for them, half a millennium ago, it was the printing press, and the establishment of trans-Atlantic trade routes. Their book club was centered permanently on one book – the Bible; but because of the printing press, that Book could be studied outside of monasteries and in several languages. People began to read the words themselves. The atmosphere for discussion grew much larger. It was everywhere. It was not necessary to actually attend religious services to be heavily involved in the dialogue. Miguel Servetus, who trained as a lawyer and also worked as a cartographer, noticed that there was no trinity in the Bible, and he wrote about this, advocating for unitarian understandings of God. His books were banned.

Originally from Aragon, Servetus had moved throughout Germany, Italy, and France, but when his religious ideas created trouble, he went

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to Geneva, where the Protestant reformation was under way. This could have worked out for him. Some of the reformers were open to discussions of Unitarianism. But Servetus also decided that he could not believe in predestination, so he offended Calvin, too. Servetus' story ended in the same manner as that of many other independent thinkers in the sixteenth century: at the stake, in flames.

Giorgio Biandrata landed in Geneva, too – fleeing Italy because he had read the Bible carefully and could not find any evidence of a trinity there. He decided to leave the Catholic Church. Although most copies of Miguel Servetus' book had been destroyed, Biandrata managed to have one. A doctor, he traveled in high circles, eventually becoming the court physician in Poland, and then in Transylvania. There he was able to find a sympathetic ear. He lent his copy of Servetus' book to a Hungarian Protestant minister, Francis Dávid, and then persuaded King John Sigismund to have Dávid appointed court preacher. Dávid read the book, talked with the doctor, and converted Sigismund, and both Unitarianism and freedom of conscience were born.

So we have a lawyer, a doctor, a minister, and a king. One was born in Spain, one in Italy, another in Transylvania, and the fourth in Hungary. The German invention of moveable type made it possible for them to share ideas, although not all of them met face to face. Nevertheless, a new community was created, centered on a faith that made use of reason, conscience, and democracy. They were dedicated to exploring truth, and some of them left their homes in order to speak honestly. Yet they believed that love taught us more about religion than truth did. They wanted to live in a way that promoted both clean consciences and good will. They noticed differences among their neighbors, and wanted to get along with all of them – to practice the Golden Rule. Servetus' book said, "Faith is with respect to God, love is with respect to God **and** to our neighbor . . . Loving is more difficult than believing. Love bears all difficulties, endures all things, and renders easy all things, including poverty and death . . . Because love is more lasting; love is a natural symbol of the future kingdom . . . Faith begins; love completes. Most wicked people believed in Christ, but no wicked person loved Christ . . . There is nothing that makes us more like God than love because God is love . . . Loving, not believing, is a property of divine nature."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Miguel Servetus, *Christianismi Restitutio* (1532), trans. Christopher Hoffman and Marian Hiller (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008). From "Treatise on Faith and Justice in Christ's

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For centuries, Unitarianism has existed as a creedless faith because of this belief that growth is godly; that beliefs limit and love expands. Unitarian Universalism is currently present in twenty-nine countries. Historically, Unitarianism had a global presence and Unitarian Universalism existed only in the US and Canada, as the result of a 1961 merger between the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America. Universalism as an organized denomination was a uniquely American faith, although its theology of salvation for all was preached by Protestants elsewhere. Unitarianism, on the other hand, as the opening story illustrates, has a long history dating back to the Italian humanist movement of the fifteenth century, and resulting in organized Unitarian churches in Poland, Transylvania, Great Britain, and British colonies.

Since the creation of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU) in 1995, it is more common for congregations outside of North America to use the name “Unitarian Universalist.” Expatriates formed some of these congregations, while others began as quasi-missions, and some grew from local leadership. What is indigenous and what is grafted on can be a matter of perspective, and influence flows in more than one direction. There are congregations in Japan and Indonesia, across Europe and South America. Cuba is home to twelve Unitarian Universalist congregations. Currently, Africa is the site of most growth. This international use of the names “Unitarian” and “Universalist” is a radical departure for liberal religionists, who have long struggled with whether or not to claim a sectarian identity. The International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) was founded in 1900, at the seventy-fifth anniversary of both the American and British Unitarian Associations, as the “International Council of Unitarians and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers,” but by the second meeting the word “Unitarian” had disappeared. Freedom soon took its place.

The existence of the ICUU does not mean there is one global religion. The expression of the faith varies from region to region, according to history, native practices, and outside leadership. Unitarianism as practiced in Kolozsvár, where the Unitarian Church is almost 500 years old and very much a result of the Reformation, looks very different from that practiced in the Khasi Hills, where Unitarianism dates to the late nineteenth century and represents an encounter among the British Raj, Scottish missionaries,

Kingdom,” p. 313. Miguel Servetus, *Christianismi Restitutio, De Charitate*, Book 3 (Vienne, France, 1553), pp. 350–351, translated from the Latin for the authors by Peter Hughes. (Note: Servetus is quoting from 1 Cor. 13:7 and 1 John 4:8.)

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Unitarian reformers, and a native population creatively preserving their own faith. Neither of these look like what one might experience in Berkeley, which has a tradition of lay leadership and ministers as consultants, or Toronto, which is minister led but incorporates testimony from members on a regular basis. British Unitarian practice differs from American, and in the US there are some congregations that use prayer books and others that would not utter the word “prayer.” The range and diversity of the worship experiences offered in churches under the umbrella of Unitarian Universalism can cause confusion. The ICUU, while fostering the growth of different expressions to this faith globally, also builds connections that help demonstrate how these diverse practices are part of the same faith. The technological revolution is a major factor in establishing supportive networks, sharing resources, and participating in relationships that continue the theological journey of growth through encounter and new definitions of who one’s neighbors might be. Indeed, a large proportion of the ICUU’s mission is accomplished via the internet. Worship and educational materials are made available, as are leadership papers for those unable to attend live symposia.

Unitarianism is an ethical, not creedal, religion. Ethics generally derive from a revealed religion, in which a supernatural force breaks into human activity and shows the correct way; for example, Moses receiving the tablets on Mount Sinai, or Mohammed hearing Allah’s word and writing it down for the faithful. Unitarian Universalism is based on Christian ethics, which express an ideal of shared justice. But Unitarian Universalism is not formally Christian. Traditional Christians believe that the life and death of Jesus revealed God to humanity: Jesus was the supernatural event interrupting human affairs and pointing out a new way. Unitarians elevate Jesus’ teachings instead, believing that working towards the one beloved community he promoted is the true purpose of religious practice. Thus, for Unitarians, ethical religion does not require a belief in the supernatural. The moral order of the universe is not a reflection of God’s character; it is a natural order revealed over time, and one in which we participate. Universalists focused more on God’s love than Jesus, and believed that salvation for anyone meant salvation for all. But there is a paradox in Unitarian Universalism: A Christian vision of unity is embedded in the faith, and the purpose of the ethical religion promoted is the creation of one beloved community; yet radical religious individualism invites diverse practices from myriad traditions.

This inconsistency is managed by focusing on ethical behavior and personal fulfillment rather than the theological source of a moral code,

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making it quite possible to be a Buddhist Unitarian, a Taoist Unitarian, or a Hindu Unitarian, or any other kind of Unitarian. Modifying the word “Unitarian” with another faith tradition signifies an individual’s embrace of a devotional practice as part of a religious life that values the Unitarian Universalist vision of a beloved community, in which all are free to develop faith using the disciplines of all world religions. One might follow the eightfold path, which is meant to help people achieve enlightenment as Gautama did; study tai chi to control the flow of energy, in order to relate well to others and to one’s own best self; or practice vegetarianism and yoga, which are rooted in a belief in reciprocity. Hindu belief in reincarnation is part of a worldview in which all living beings are part of one another, and so learning to take the perspective of others is what keeps creation whole. This theological pluralism can confound, keeping depth, shared language, and practice out of reach; and it can enliven, by demonstrating the possibilities of true faith to cross borders. The challenge of Unitarian Universalism is to hold its paradoxical elements in creative tension, in a sustaining, complex, and rich manner; to let the contradictions augment faith rather than divide it with rigid, politicized definitions.

Some of the disciplines pursued by people within Unitarian Universalism are a response to the lack of visible structure to the faith. The free Christian tradition and its continuing evolution means that there are no specific prayers associated with Unitarian Universalism, or beads to count, or rituals to enact. There are not many rules or boundaries that can make people feel contained; reassured that they are acting as proper members. Some embrace the freedom as openness, and others as an opportunity to create meaningful practices of their own, often borrowed from religions that have a more physical component. The religion is broad enough to hold both responses comfortably.

This breadth is a legacy of a very strong tradition of literacy. The early Unitarians’ certainty that they were apostles of the true faith, correctly understood, was born of reading; and the Universalist belief in salvation for all derived from Bible study. Today, noting the importance of reading Scripture seems an illiberal statement, and a contradiction. Many Unitarian Universalists do not use the Bible at all, and some congregations have biblically based services about as frequently as they have lectures on astrophysics. Isn’t it conservatives who are centered on the Bible? But it was a radical and inherently political religion that would dare take the text out of the hands of the priestly class and make it available to all. The religious dissenters wanted a culture in which everyone could read so that those in power would not be able to claim God’s word as a method of control. They

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wanted to live according to an understanding of God acquired first hand, and believed texts would help them to do so. Reading was inherently tied to reason and a distrust of authority, which led to vernacular translations of the Bible. Making the text available in the languages people spoke transformed the Bible into a living thing, an object with which people had real relationships. The Dissenters were people of the Book, and went where biblical study led. This eventually was to archeology, higher criticism, evolution, comparative religions, and a general respect for the written word as a repository of human wisdom.

It also led to a religious tradition that is largely verbal, not ritualistic. This is not a rebellion against the pageantry of worship so much as it is a begging for meaning and authenticity among people who are skeptical of power. The physical enactment of Unitarian Universalism has always been through social justice work. Far from being elitist, this tradition of literacy represents a deep commitment to social equality and the empowerment of the laboring classes. The democratization of the Bible is what caused royal leaders to fuse heresy with treason.

The population with the largest concentration of Unitarians can be found in Transylvania, an area of Romania that was once an independent kingdom. About 20 percent of the 1.4 million people in Transylvania are linguistic-ethnic Hungarians, whose presence on this land in the Carpathian Mountains goes back for over a thousand years. In the sixteenth century, Hungary was conquered and divided in three parts: one ruled by the Habsburg empire, another by the Ottomans, and the third, “the land beyond the forest,” was ruled by nobility. With Christians to one side and Muslims to the other, Transylvania became home to the only Unitarian king in history thus far.<sup>2</sup> John Sigismund was the king converted to Unitarianism by Francis Dávid, the court preacher from the opening story. Under his leadership, religious tolerance was practiced and reason was valued more than force. Large numbers of the Transylvanian population became Unitarian, and have remained so, in spite of persecutions which grew over the centuries, and have only recently ceased. After World War I, the native Hungarian language was expunged, and the Unitarians’ lands were taken and redistributed. Programs to force assimilation were put in place. Yet Unitarians remain. Five percent of the general population of

<sup>2</sup> Czechoslovakia’s first president, Tomas Masaryk (1850–1937), in office from 1918 to 1935, was extremely sympathetic to Unitarianism, and spoke at the 1906 International Conference on Religious Freedom. His wife, Charlotte Garrigue, was a committed Unitarian who had grown up in the Brooklyn, NY congregation. The US has had four Unitarian presidents: John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Millard Fillmore, and William Howard Taft.

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Transylvania is Unitarian; a full quarter of the linguistic-ethnic Hungarians living there are members of this faith.

The Unitarianism of Transylvania is Christian. Jesus is a great teacher, not part of a trinitarian God-head, but the faith is a Protestant one, with a catechism. The 125 churches (70,000 members) are organized into six districts, and governed with a system of bishops. Freedom here means freedom to embrace their identity and heritage. Children are nurtured in this faith. Since the fall of Ceaușescu's regime in 1989, restrictions against Unitarian ministers have been lessened, and many churches in Transylvania are partnered with congregations across the globe, especially in the US. A pastoral letter dated June 29, 2010 and sent by Bishop Ferenc Balint-Benczédi in the wake of a tragedy in the Transylvanian Unitarian community, articulated this religion as a lived faith in an all-too-real world. A minister who had served three different churches over the past decade suffered a breakdown, and murdered his two young children in the church before killing himself, leaving behind a terminally ill spouse and extended family. The bishop expressed some shock that the Unitarian faith had been able to sustain members through the severe trials of the past, only to find themselves lost at this moment. Balint-Benczédi was also concerned about a revival of hatred towards and misunderstanding of Unitarianism in the wake of this event. He made clear the reliance on one God and the human conscience, promoting action in service to life. "Let us remember that our forebears made difficult but sustaining sacrifices for this precious faith, in order that they may pass it on to us. Let us remember the pure and simple faith . . . that has always compelled us to love God and serve people. Over four and a half centuries, our church has enriched humanity with immeasurable values. Let us ensure that this legacy lives on . . . May God give us spiritual strength so we can stand firm beside those in need. With our godly lives, let us prove that we are brothers and sisters, children of God."

Whether Unitarian Universalism is Christian or not is answered partially by location, and partially by individualism. In Transylvania, it is definitely Christian. In Great Britain and in Ireland, it is generally Christian. In the US and Canada, the faith is technically and formally not Christian. The Unitarian Universalist Association was never admitted to the National Council of the Churches of Christ, because the faith does not require a confession of Christianity as a means to salvation, and in fact promotes other religions as equally valid. There are many Unitarian Universalists who believe broadly in theism, a God beyond all the other gods, uniting them. Some are natural theists: that broad God is expressed in the laws of

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nature. And there are many Unitarian Universalists who believe in no god at all, but put their faith in people and the known universe. Nevertheless, there are Unitarian Universalists in the US who do consider themselves Christian, and there are some congregations that are explicitly Christian in their worship. These are a distinct minority, and tend to be congregations that date back to the early days of the movement in the US. More than a third of the current congregations in the US and Canada were started after World War II, many of them without clergy, at least for some time. The practice of Unitarian Universalism is open, and incorporates diverse traditions and resources. The roots of Unitarian Universalism are decidedly Christian, and the forms remain vaguely Protestant. Services tend to be on Sunday mornings. There are readings, hymns, and spoken reflections. The religion of Jesus is respected; the exclusivity of institutional Christianity is not. The story of Jonah, in which a faithful Jew must use his knowledge of God to assist the people of Nineveh, represents a message Unitarian Universalists embrace: God would not be God if only one group of people were blessed. Yet it remains a challenge to be simultaneously a particular faith and a universal one.

Unitarian Universalists believe strongly in freedom. It is perceived as the natural condition of life, and a necessity for growth. As a free faith, Unitarianism meant that people were not compelled to attend services in the way they had been coerced to attend Catholic, Anglican, or Calvinist ones. The distrust of external authority and questioning stance of Unitarianism is related to a belief in freedom that must be protected. The services themselves also expressed a theological freedom, in which conscience was valued over conformity. This form of freedom to use the heart and mind as guides in the embrace of a meaningful truth was intended to prevent empty religion, or hypocrisy. It was an embodiment of Luther's complaint that "forced worship stinks in God's nostrils." Real religion – real worship – was contingent upon the soul or spirit of the worshiper being truly present, involved, and caring. But assuming a freely chosen faith as infinitely more powerful and motivating than anything inherited creates a tension over the generations. How is the institution to provide children with a religious identity if that identity must be freely chosen? Unlike most traditional religions, Unitarian Universalism does not raise its own next generation. Growth is contingent upon people finding the faith and choosing it as their own. Other minority religions keep their children in protective cells and inculcate loyalty to the faith. Unitarian Universalists have, in recent years, been more interested in explicitly teaching their children to remain in the fold. This is a test of both a culture that resists evangelizing and a



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conception of freedom that has limited the religion by its very openness, but it may also be a corrective. Ten percent of the Unitarian Universalist population was brought up in the faith. Evidence does not support the self-defeating notion that everyone will eventually choose this faith on her or his own.

Professional leadership has been increasingly valued in the last generation, as people have come to realize that embracing individualism without supporting institutions to defend individuals and combat ideologues allows humanitarian crises to develop. In the late twentieth century, authority grew more centralized. Still, Unitarian Universalism struggles with professionalism in religion, which can sometimes be perceived as antithetical to congregationalism and democratic practice. An average Unitarian Universalist congregation in the US has 156 adult members, but the median number is smaller. There are some very large churches, but for the most part this is a small group practice of direct participation.

Unitarianism has been understood as a natural religion, in which people living on different continents and at different times have independently come to discover truth through the process of reason. This is clearly most prominent in a Christian context, because biblical study revealed conflicts with church doctrine and practice, and led to a reliance on reason and conscience for guidance. Unitarians deny the trinity as both unreasonable and non-biblical. They are also against infant baptism, since it denies the child the opportunity to decide to participate. But this process of applying reason to faith is not limited to Christianity. The Unitarians of northeast India practice a faith that evolved from a tribal system of ancestor worship. The Japanese never applied reason to Christianity; instead they adopted Unitarianism because the lack of supernatural beliefs complemented their Shinto and Buddhist backgrounds. The use of reason is what ties humanists to this faith as well. The material world, and action taken within it, is understood as the source of all meaning.

Long-term Unitarians associate the principles of freedom and reason with a third religious value: tolerance. Since the emergence of the faith in Eastern Europe, religious tolerance has been upheld as a central tenet. This does not sound particularly revolutionary in the twenty-first century, and in today's globalized economy and ecology. But religious tolerance as a precept of faith takes on enormous significance in the context of the persecution and exclusion that Unitarians suffered. This is not political correctness, but a radical belief that everyone counts, and the people who insisted on this form of tolerance were punished for it. In many ways, Unitarians were harbingers of modernity; a group of people who responded to their

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exposure to differences with openness, curiosity, and respect rather than cruelty and prohibitions. The use of reason demanded that all people be treated equally, and that all faiths be treated as valid. Since 1945, when Earl Morse Wilbur (1866–1956) published his magnum opus, the two-volume *History of Unitarianism*, “Freedom, reason, and tolerance,” has been the triumvirate. Wilbur’s history is also the source of the notion that Unitarianism evolved independently on separate continents. This volume does not support that notion. Global interchange has a longer history than our memories. This volume also challenges the interpretation that Unitarianism developed from Puritan congregations in Massachusetts, and spread west. That is one strand, complementing another, more liberal, strand of Unitarianism transplanted from Great Britain.

Wilbur’s was an academic examination of what Unitarianism meant. Institutionally, his principles were not formally present in mission statements, Principles and Purposes, or covenants. These statements differ from continent to continent. The General Assembly of British Unitarian and Free Christian Churches revised its statement of purpose in 2001, for the first time since 1928, saying that they exist “to promote free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and celebration of humanity, and respect for all creation and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition.” Since 1985, the US and Canada have had seven principles; the ICUU affirms five. These five are: liberty of conscience in matters of faith; the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice and compassion in human relations; responsible stewardship of the earth’s living system; and a commitment to democratic principles. Some of the language is exactly the same as that of the principles adopted by the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA); but some is not. The UUA principles include a goal of world community, which does not appear in the international group.

The question of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist plagues the US part of the movement, and raises questions about how the legitimacy of a faith is determined. Is it achieved through longevity? Unitarianism has roots in the Radical Reformation, but if length of existence becomes a criterion for a valid religion, Unitarians can go back further, to 325 CE and the Council of Nicaea. This is when the first creed was established, and legally recognized a father/son relationship between God and Jesus. Unitarians can claim to have maintained the original, pre-Council faith; and to practice the religion *of* Jesus, rather than the one *about* him. Establishing a line of succession in which the Unitarian idea is passed down from one thinker to the next may not be completely true, and may even run counter to the notion that the religion develops naturally, but it achieves